



BELGIUM AND THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT: A BRIEF HISTORY

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On 19 August 1895, Belgian co-operators were among those who created the INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE - ICA. FEBECOOP, heir to these pioneers, has always considered the ICA as an essential institution for the co-operative movement.

In Belgium, cooperatives appeared historically very early. The first developments of the cooperative movement in Belgium also have a number of specific features.

The origins (1860-1918) - The first cooperatives were born in Belgium in the 1860s, in the country's first industrial areas. Often of modest size, few have survived. The first large scale, sustainable project was born in Ghent in 1880: the VOORUIT. In the beginning, it was only a cooperative bakery. Less than 30 years later, the VOORUIT had 10,000 members (a quarter of Ghent's families) and had expanded into groceries, butchery, fabrics and clothing, etc. The VOORUIT was the first cooperative bakery in Ghent. It owned several factories and even a bank.

In addition, this cooperative had two particularities that will be found in many other projects. A political commitment, a declared socialist commitment, first of all. Secondly (and this is partly related), this cooperative represented much more than a business belonging to its client-cooperators: it was at the same time a House of the People, i.e. a meeting place for the working class, structured around a café, a meeting room, a party room, a library, etc. It was also a place where the working class could meet. Socialist-inspired cooperation will rapidly develop on this model throughout the country.

Agricultural cooperation, of Christian obedience, will be born in 1890 (BOERENBOND). At the end of the First World War, Christian workers' cooperatives also developed. The consumer cooperatives will play a very important role in Belgian economic and social history.

Development and the apogee (1919-1960) - During this period, cooperation occupies a more and more prominent place in distribution, in pharmacy, and develops in financial services, banking and insurance cooperatives.

Decline and stabilization (1961-1985) - This period will see the disappearance of the large consumer cooperatives for two reasons. Clinging to a desire to establish themselves regionally, they were too small in a changing economic context. Mergers and mergers came too late. Moreover, due to a lack of vision, they did not believe in the technological revolution represented by the concept of the supermarket, a concept that the population was going to overwhelm, and with respect to which the cooperatives would very quickly fall far behind. By the time they realize this, it will be too late. The place is taken, vis-à-vis all sections of the population, including the working classes. One cessation of activity follows another. The cooperative movements, both socialist and social-Christian, are therefore falling back on banking, insurance and pharmacy, but in a combative manner, developing in these sectors.

The Great Manoeuvres in the Financial Sector - Towards a Cooperative Renewal (1986-2020).

This period is marked by a strengthening of cooperative enterprises in their respective sectors. At the same time, new cooperative initiatives are emerging.

The financial sector is then faced with immense challenges linked to the opening of the European market. The three major cooperative groups will carry out numerous acquisition, disposal and restructuring operations. Two major cooperatives will emerge (the ARCO group of the Christian workers' movement being put into liquidation): P&V, which today occupies 6th place in the ranking of insurance companies in Belgium; CERA, a financial cooperative structure (linked to BOERENBOND) which today holds around 7% of the capital of KBC, the leading Belgian bank. In the pharmaceutical distribution sector, cooperatives have consolidated a very important position and represent 20% of the Belgian market, including MULTIPHARMA, the leader in the sector in Belgium.

This period is also one of renewed interest in the cooperative formula and sees the emergence of new initiatives. In a context of economic difficulties, the cooperative approach has emerged as a solution to the problems of employment and professional integration. In addition, other sectors have emerged in response to new concerns, mainly ecological: renewable energies, organic farming, the search for short distribution channels, fair trade, etc. In terms of unquestionable successes, the example of cooperatives for the joint production and management of renewable energy is certainly worth highlighting.

FEBECOOP and ICA

FEBECOOP today mainly groups together Belgian cooperatives from the movement of socialist origin, including P&V and MULTIPHARMA, and thus ensures continuity with those who participated in the historic congress of 19 August 1885.

The Belgian participation in this founding congress was natural: the cooperative movement that FEBECOOP represents today was convinced from the outset of the importance of creating an international movement: these pioneers were convinced that the struggle for social change could only be won by showing solidarity across borders. If the capitalism to which the cooperative movement wanted to offer an alternative became international, so too must the cooperative movement. Such a demand is perhaps even more pressing today.

This is why FEBECOOP has remained an active member of the ICA and its European Regional Office, now called Cooperatives Europe.

The added value of the ICA for the Belgian co-operative movement is evident on several levels: a force of representation, a place for exchange, a regulatory body concerning the co-operative principles.

As we have said, the co-operative movement must transcend national borders and profile itself as an international, global force. To do so, it needs strong representation through a structure such as the ICA, whose remarkable durability should be underlined. After 125 years, the ICA is still present as the only international institution with the vocation to represent co-operatives from all sectors and from all over the world. One can only bow to this continuity of the ICA which has survived, apart from sometimes some internal divergences or tensions, two world wars, the Russian revolution of 1917 followed, later, by the constitution of the Soviet bloc, the Cold War, and its appearance on the international scene, including economic and social, of developing countries, the collapse of the Soviet bloc and its economic, social and political system, the irruption of China and other Asian countries into the world economy, the globalisation of the economy in a context of exacerbated free competition as a major dogma, etc. Never has the ICA broken up, never has the ICA ceased to function, adapting to the changing world. Better still, the ICA has constantly welcomed new members from different backgrounds and has strengthened its representative legitimacy over time. At the UN, the ICA participates in high-level discussions on co-

operatives through its consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). FEBECOOP supports the ICA in this indispensable mission.

The ICA, and Cooperatives Europe at the European level, are also needed as a forum for exchange and mutual reinforcement. Belgian co-operatives, like others, need to share information, reflections and experiences with other co-operatives. They also need an organisation like the ICA to strengthen their local legitimacy and to place the issues they are tackling in a more general international context. Conversely, given the often difficult context in which they carry out their mission, co-operatives need to be inspired by the fact that elsewhere in the world their counterparts, like them, are working to find solutions. FEBECOOP strives to participate, both at the global and European level, in these exchanges and to benefit from the mutually reinforcing effects that result.

Last but not least, the ICA plays an indispensable role as a regulatory body for cooperative principles. The strength of conviction of co-operatives and their real belonging to a unified community would be greatly diminished if they were not supported by a common vision of what constitutes the fundamental elements of their values and operating principles. FEBECOOP has always followed with great interest the work and publications of the ICA in this field.